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# Making Connections with Community Partners for Postsecondary Mental Health
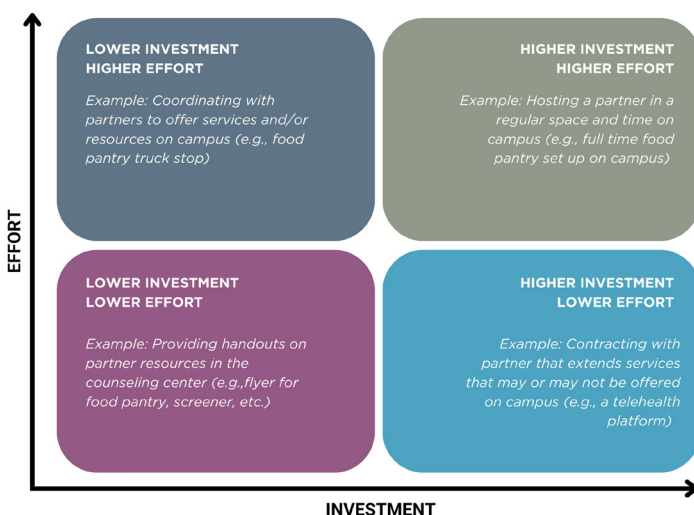
## INTRODUCTION

*Community partnerships provide an important avenue for meeting student needs, especially as demand for mental health services grows and nationwide mental health personnel shortages persist. Counseling centers and student support services simply cannot meet the needs of all students—nor should they. Postsecondary institutions can partner with organizations in the community that excel in providing services that are not currently available on campus or not available at the necessary capacity. This brief provides an overview of the role that community partnerships can play for institutions and actionable strategies for developing strong relationships with your partners.*

## Overview of Community Partnerships for Mental Health

Developing community partnerships is an essential step in meeting the needs of various student populations on campus, including mental health needs, basic needs, and other supports. Most college campuses do not have the allocation of resources, funding, or expertise to provide all necessary services or programs that support mental health needs on campus. Colleges can still help meet these needs by building strong connections with community partners that can provide the level of support that students may require depending on their life circumstances.

There are a wide range of community partnerships that postsecondary institutions could leverage to expand mental health and basic needs services for students. Each

partnership requires varying levels of investment, effort, and coordination. Figure 1 provides examples of different types of community partnerships, highlighting the effort required to maintain the partnership and the level of institutional investment needed for each. As the figure demonstrates, **even lower effort, lower investment partnerships can have a significant impact on the lives of students.**

## Tips for Successful Community Partnerships

Community partnerships are not always easy to develop and maintain. Here, we provide some brief tips for successful relationships between institutions and their community partners.

### 1. Creating a Shared Language

When institutions and community partners work together, it is important that they develop a shared language because the vernacular to define needs or services may differ across organizations; this may be particularly important for departments, such as health services, that are bridging gaps to mental health services but that may not specialize in mental health themselves. For example, it is important for health services staff to be able to accurately describe the mental health services and supports available through the counseling center to help manage students' expectations upon receiving a referral. Or, if a community partner offers 'support groups' it should be clear whether they are offering groups for grief, substance use, symptom management, or something else entirely! Developing a shared language helps partners to avoid misunderstandings, ensures that information is not misconstrued and enables providers to make appropriate and trauma-informed referrals.

*Figure 1. Community partnerships plotted by effort and institutional investment required.*



**EFFORT**

**LOWER INVESTMENT
HIGHER EFFORT**

*Example: Coordinating with partners to offer services and/or resources on campus (e.g., food pantry truck stop)*

**HIGHER INVESTMENT
HIGHER EFFORT**

*Example: Hosting a partner in a regular space and time on campus (e.g., full time food pantry set up on campus)*

**LOWER INVESTMENT
LOWER EFFORT**

*Example: Providing handouts on partner resources in the counseling center (e.g.,flyer for food pantry, screener, etc.)*

**HIGHER INVESTMENT
LOWER EFFORT**

*Example: Contracting with partner that extends services that may or may not be offered on campus (e.g., a telehealth platform)*

**INVESTMENT**

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## 2. Developing Shared Goals and Expectations

It is important for the higher education institution and community partners to agree on shared goals to ensure that both parties are aligned in their efforts. Effective goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely (SMART). A SMART goal for a partnership might be, *"By the end of the 2024-2025 academic year, 30% of students will receive life skills training from the community partner."*

Once goals are established, both parties should determine measures for accountability. Data plays an important role throughout the partnership to evaluate progress and identify improvement opportunities. Partners should develop a process for tracking SMART goals that includes everything from who records the data (and how) to the frequency with which the data will be reviewed (and by whom).

## 3. Planning for Communication

Developing a communication plan is crucial for formalizing and maintaining partnerships with outside organizations. A well-designed communication strategy ensures effective and transparent collaboration, fostering stakeholder alignment and creating clear expectations which can promote a sense of trust and accountability. A communication strategy may also support external promotion of the partnership's outcomes and impact, attracting further support and involvement from the broader community. A communication plan should include both the process for communicating with one another (e.g., is the partnership achieving the SMART goals) and communicating to the partners' respective leadership teams (e.g., communicating the successes and challenges of the partnership). The Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health's Guide to Campus-Community Partnerships provides additional considerations and resources for developing communication strategies between partners.

## 4. Formalizing the Partnership

As implied by Figure 1, institutions may not want or need to formalize all community partnerships. Lower investment activities, for example, might benefit from informal partnership structures, such as partnering agreements which are not legally binding and are easily re-negotiated. Partnering agreements are developed and agreed upon by both parties and are typically short-term or open-ended with no established deadline. Securing an informal partnership agreement may be the first step in establishing trust between the institution and the community partner. Both formal and informal partnerships should include shared goals, language, and expectations for how the work will be done together.

Higher investment and/or higher effort activities might require a more formal structure. An example is a memorandum of understanding (MOU), which is a written agreement between two entities that solidifies commitments for each. The MOU is often finalized between the two entities' legal teams and serves as a legal contract, though MOUs are generally agreements without money exchanging hands. This is in contrast to a professional services agreement (PSA), in which services are rendered for payment. Benefits of establishing an MOU are that it provides clarity in the partnership, reduces uncertainty, creates a paper trail with agreed-upon terms and expectations, and lessens the risk of conflicts and confusion in the future.

Whether developing a formal or informal partnership structure, it is important that both parties agree on the terms used in the structure and their meaning—where a shared language, common goals, and communication plan can make the partnership more effective and meaningful.

Your institution probably has already established partnerships in your community to expand your capacity to support student need. We encourage you to explore your institution's current and potential partnerships, using data around student mental health needs to determine where there may be opportunities to better serve your students through community partnerships.